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Something more than imagination: Archaeology and fiction

Robert E. Witcher and Daniël P. van Helden

In his experimental book on the religious history of the ancient world, Keith Hopkins (1999) deploys a range of fictive techniques to explore the experiences of pagan, Christian and Jewish peoples. Chapters of fiction are interspersed with Hopkins's correspondence (potentially genuine but quite possibly invented) with colleagues, who appraise the scholarly value of his efforts to imagine ancient religious life. One criticism he receives from a correspondent about his use of fictional scenes is labelled as:

> the cream bun syndrome. One story may be amusing; two stories may be tolerable; the third story sticks in the gullet ... and any subsequent story makes your satiated audience feel more than slightly sick. (Hopkins 1999: 151)

This critique suggests that it is the excessive use of such stories, rather than their fundamental form, that is problematic. Yet Hopkins's correspondent continues: '[s]tories tyrannise, and infantilise their audience. ... when you tell stories, how can I respond, except with a polite smile, or a yawn, a laugh or another story?' (Hopkins 1999: 152). The question raised concerns how the scholarly reader should react to a fictional narrative. The commentator's perspective maintains a sharp distinction between fact and fiction, allowing standard scholarly criteria of objectivity and accuracy to be applied to one set of stories and emotional and aesthetic responses to another. Yet, if the border between fact and fiction is not a line but rather a zone, then the reader can evaluate a narrative story and come to a judgement using a wider range

of criteria. In this view, there is no need for fictional stories to tyrannize or infantilize their reader any more than an archaeological site report or a scholarly paper might. Both types of narrative can, and should, be evaluated critically in relation to the evidence, their stated objectives and for their plausibility.

The crafts of archaeology and writing are intimately interwoven in the creation of historical narrative. Having destroyed the material remains of the past through excavation, the archaeologist must recreate the past with words. Yet those words are preceded by other literary and archaeological narratives and, in turn, will themselves be combined into new stories. In this chapter, we explore aspects of the long and close relationship between scholarly archaeological accounts and fictional literature, with particular reference to historical novels. In doing so, we follow in a tradition of writing about archaeological writing (Joyce et al. 2002; Connah 2010; Fagan 2010), but respond in particular to a renewed interest in narrative form and fictive techniques within archaeology (Shanks 2012; Van Dyke and Bernbeck 2015; van Helden and Witcher 2020a). We begin with an outline of the role of narrative and intersections of fact and fiction in archaeology, exploring some of the perils and potential for archaeological researchers engaging with fiction. Arguing for the value of fiction and storytelling, we explore how fiction enables access to an ethical, empathetic view of the past which can highlight the situatedness of all archaeological knowledge and the limits of empathy. We use James Michener's ([1965] 2014) novel *The Source* as a case study through which we argue that fiction's capacity to represent different scales of analysis, human agency, multiple perspectives and historical causation offers a reflection of, and a model for, the archaeological research process and the narratives that archaeologists create from the material remains of the past.

Imagining the archaeological: Challenges and risks

Archaeological writing is more than the communication of scientific observation and facts. Humans apprehend the world – past, present and future – through narratives or stories (Gottschall 2012). Archaeology, as a means of making sense of the past, involves storytelling and the transformation

of evidence into meaningful narrative, a process which often draws on deeply ingrained literary structures and tropes (White 1973). A century ago, G. M. Trevelyan distinguished three complementary strands of the broader discipline of history: the scientific, the imaginative and the literary. The historian first accumulates and sifts the evidence, then classifies, makes guesses and generalizations, and

> last but not least comes the literary function … For this last process I use the word literature, because I wish to lay greater stress than modern historians are willing to do, both on the difficulty and also on the importance of planning and writing a powerful narrative of historical events … Writing is not, therefore, a secondary but one of the primary tasks of the historian. (Trevelyan 1913: 31)

A century later, recognition of the integral importance of the literary in accounts of the past endures: for example, Lekson (2018: 102) contends, 'Narrative is always an argument, a persuasion. Rhetoric is not as important as fact, but it's pretty important. Style is a key element of conventional history.' Today, across the full spectrum of the discipline of archaeology, from the arts and humanities to the sciences, there is little disagreement about the centrality of narrative within archaeological writing (cf. Shanks 2012: 127–44; Gerbault et al. 2014). However, the case for the role of imagination and, specifically, for the use of fictive writing techniques within archaeology is more contentious, even though it has long figured in archaeological accounts.

Archaeologists often work on sites woven into fictional or mytho-historical accounts. The most obvious of these is Troy, the subject of Homer's *Iliad*. It is a site where the very concepts of fact and fiction have been pushed to their limits (Wallace 2004: 102–3). Hence, while early investigators used Homer's text to guide their exploration of the site, later archaeologists have had to unravel the resulting confusion of reality and rhetoric. The example of Troy, however, is far from unique. Arthurian legend, for instance, has influenced a number of archaeologists. Ralegh Radford's mid-twentieth-century excavations around Southwest England were increasingly shaped by his belief in the veracity of the medieval texts, culminating in his claim, following the account of Giraldus Cambrensis, to have discovered the graves of Arthur and Guinevere at Glastonbury Abbey. As a result, the recent reassessment and publication

of Radford's excavation archive has demanded the careful disentanglement of the literary from the material evidence (Green and Gilchrist 2015). Nor are such influences, and potential confusions, limited to the allure of early textual sources; modern novels can be equally powerful. In the preface to his analysis of the Renaissance rediscovery of ancient Rome, for example, Leonard Barkan (1999: xxx) describes his personal awareness of walking in the footsteps, not of the actual Roman emperors but rather their characters as portrayed in the Robert Graves (1934) novel, *I, Claudius*.

One of the dangers of such intersections of fictional narrative and archaeology is that they may be deliberately manipulated for political purposes. Butrint, on the coast of Albania, provides an example of the interweaving of archaeology, politics and literature, specifically Virgil's *Aeneid*. The brief appearance of this small port site in Virgil's text has supported long-term identity- and placemaking activities. Three very different regimes – colonial Italians, Greek nationalists and Albanian communists – have been able to draw on this epic poem to articulate distinct political and ethnic claims for the site and for Albania as a whole (Hodges 2017). The risk here is that archaeology becomes not the 'handmaiden of history' (Noël Hume 1964) but rather the handmaiden of historical fiction (for further examples, see van Helden and Witcher 2020b). As such, works of literature may attract but also confuse the conduct of archaeological research, and the resulting hybrids of fact and fiction may be prone to political manipulation.

Despite the apparent dangers, archaeologists have also engaged in writing their own fictive narratives, for example, incorporating imagined scenes into scholarly accounts. Yet, archaeologists who have made use of such narratives have been accused of sanitizing, or alternatively colonizing, the past. Andrew Fleming (2006: 276), for example, argues that the characters who populate fictive archaeological accounts are often socially, politically and morally neutral in order to avoid offence or caricature:

> We are unlikely to find a contemporary archaeologist in the near future writing a narrative vignette like this: 'as he clubbed the odious bastard to death, he was conscious how well his skull would look in the wall-niche – something to give the wife a thrill when she did the dusting – and how good a few slices of his thigh would taste, accompanied by a dandelion salad'.

Fleming argues that the characters created by archaeologists are 'ciphers' (2006: 276–7). Archaeologists choose to create particular types of people and eschew others, perhaps out of a concern not to colonize or appropriate the past. The effect, however, may be precisely to reduce the otherness of the past, shaping it to the concerns of the present. Reinhard Bernbeck (2015: 261) goes further to argue that the fictionalization of individuals in archaeological accounts, however well intended, demonstrates a disrespect for past people, co-opting their lives and experiences in the service of our own. He advocates a shift away from narratives driven by people towards an emphasis on material culture (Bernbeck 2015: 267–71). In this way, Bernbeck's position reflects wider trends in archaeological theory, which seek to de-centre humans through symmetrical, new materialist and post-humanist approaches (see Harris and Cipolla 2017: 129–69).

Bernbeck's (2004: 114) argument that the present imposes self-serving narrative constructions on the past makes a powerful ethical case against the writing of history in any narrative form, let alone fictional. But, as humans, we impose narrative not only on the past but also on the present and future. Narrative is how humans manage the complexity of reality and how we structure our experience of life, the universe and everything (cf. Gadamer 1994: 31; Gottschall 2012). A comprehensive grasp of reality is beyond human understanding, for however correct or complete our picture of one element, many others must be omitted (Wachterhauser 1994: 4–9). Since we make choices about the aspects of reality we acknowledge, the narratives we construct are inevitably partial and political. We have no other means of experiencing and making sense of the past (Shanks 1992: 130–1) or any other aspect of reality. Thus although Fleming and Bernbeck perceive 'presentism' in the ways in which archaeologists have written both conventional and fictional narratives of the past, there is no non-political standpoint from which to proceed. It is in this light that we should understand the use of fictive techniques to reinsert underrepresented groups such as enslaved people, women and children into archaeological accounts in order to address systemic historical and contemporary injustices (cf. Gill et al. 2019; Hobden 2020). For if archaeologists do not speak for the marginalized people of the past, however inarticulately, who will (cf. Tarlow 2001; Pluciennik 2015)?

Hence, far from being politically and morally neutral, these 'characters' are typically introduced into the narrative with clear and decisive purpose.

The disciplinary integrity and authority of archaeologists have traditionally depended upon the maintenance of a clear distinction between scholarly and fictional writing. While novels invent and entertain, the conventional site report documents, as objectively as possible, observations of tangible material traces excavated from the ground. For the fear is that if archaeologists give credence to invented narratives or, even worse, write their own, they risk losing the respect of their peers and surrendering the ground from which to challenge misinformed or malign uses of the archaeological past (González-Ruibal, González and Criado-Boado 2018). Yet, we contend that the crafts of the historical novelist and the archaeologist are less distinct than the frequently asserted binary opposition of fact versus fiction suggests, both in terms of the creative processes involved and in how we evaluate and reach judgement about these narratives (van Helden and Witcher 2020b). The material remains of the past undeniably exist and serve to constrain what can be said about the past (Wickham-Jones 2020); archaeological narratives, fictional or otherwise, can and should be tested against the material, contextual, scientific or comparative evidence. This testing not only ensures that narratives are empirically sound but also provides archaeology's defence against the outright invention of the past in support of fringe ideas or extreme ideologies. Provided that we are explicit and critical in our practice (Pollock 2015: 284), archaeologists should be able to draw on the methods of historical fiction without fear of ceding ethical ground to alien-hunters or political extremists (Shanks 1992: 132–3). Nonetheless, within these evidential bounds there is still wide scope for the writing of multiple and competing stories, for '[a]rchaeology cannot write narratives that are true beyond reasonable doubt, but it can, perhaps, write narrative histories that are clear and convincing' (Lekson 2018: 101).

We therefore argue that a more thorough examination of the borderlands between fact and fiction is required to evaluate the intersection of archaeology and literature. The following sections explore in further detail how and why fiction and storytelling are valuable for archaeological practice and how they might be employed to address questions of empathy which are central to, yet often overlooked by, archaeologists. We then explore these issues through a case study based on James Michener's novel, *The Source*.

Telling stories: The value of fiction

Given the array of potential problems raised by the integration of fictive techniques into archaeological research, it is understandable that archaeologists might decide to stay well away from the border between fact and fiction. It is easier to refortify the line, sanctioning those who stray across it as 'transgressive' (see Praetzellis 2015: 119–32). Yet we argue that the borderlands between archaeology, the literary and the imaginary, are a creative space where the nature of the archaeological is laid bare and becomes amenable to exploration. Existing uses of fictive techniques in archaeological writing demonstrate a great variety of aims and forms and are deployed without any dominant theoretical affiliation (see van Helden and Witcher 2020b). Probably the most common usage has been to articulate archaeological evidence through short fictional vignettes that aim to 'show' rather than tell. By contextualizing the evidence within the temporal or spatial structure of a literary narrative, the reader can encounter and process the material afresh. Sidebotham (2016), for example, connects disparate archaeological sites and objects from around the western Indian Ocean by narrating a story about a merchant travelling from Roman Egypt to India, and Witcher (2017) uses narrative vignettes to show how specific categories of material culture were used in very different ways in diverse parts of the Roman world. Both imaginative accounts seek to demonstrate economic connections and cultural differences in preparation for subsequent scholarly discussion. Information received narratively is processed differently from non-narrative information (Green and Brock 2000; Green, Garst and Brock 2004), so new awareness, and potentially insight, may result from experiencing even familiar material presented in an alternative format (cf. Kavanagh 2020).

As well as benefits for the reader, fictive techniques also offer great potential for the writer/researcher. Writing fictional scenes, or even just thinking fictionally, demands great rigour as well as creativity and compels the writer to identify and confront the fragmentary nature of most archaeological evidence. Whereas traditional scholarly accounts allow the author to steer around gaps in archaeological knowledge by focusing narrowly on the material at hand, the creation of rounded and plausible fictional narrative demands a new

attentiveness to the many evidential lacunae. This may demand additional research to identify evidence from elsewhere or the search for new types of evidence to 'fill' these gaps. These narratives often also require an unequivocal choice to be made between competing alternatives (Elphinstone 2020: 67). Questions cannot be ignored or left open because the evidence is mute or inconclusive. Hence while archaeologists might write in a scholarly report about 'ritual specialists of some sort', in a novel (or other fictional narrative) these specialists need specific roles and fleshed-out characters (Patton 2020: 80). Most importantly, the demands of such narratives require logic and realism. Commenting on the value of her collaboration with the novelist Margaret Elphinstone, archaeologist Caroline Wickham-Jones observes that previously 'I had never tried to make my idea of Mesolithic life actually *work*' (Elphinstone and Wickham-Jones 2012: 536, emphasis added). The use of fictive techniques can reposition the author in relation to the available evidence, sharpening thinking and stimulating insights and questions that would not otherwise have been entertained (Gear and O'Neal Gear 2003; Gibb 2000, 2020). In this way, the techniques of fiction can help to mobilize and recontextualize extant knowledge (Wickham-Jones 2020: 45).

Another powerful motivation for adopting fictive approaches is the potential for humanizing our accounts, reinserting and making central the people who created the archaeological material with which we work. Anthropocentric narrative, relating the archaeological evidence to human actions, provides structure and meaning to descriptive detail (Grethlein and Huitink 2017), and fictional narrative specifically allows the lives of human agents to come to the fore. In turn, the incorporation of these tangible individuals and groups into our narratives opens the possibility of working across, and integrating issues of, scale. Archaeologists are often more comfortable and confident dealing with long-term, broad-scale processes, such as the transition to farming. But such processes are the result of, and also have effect on, aggregated human actions (Robb and Pauketat 2013). Conventional archaeological narratives have often struggled to accommodate these multiple scales. The novel, though a highly varied literary type, offers some potential here. In its long form, the profusion of incidental detail and the ability to present alternative perspectives, for example, the author can relate the lives of individuals to the wider forces that shape them and in turn are shaped by them. In this way, fictional narrative

can provide a means to move back and forth between scales and to draw out the inherent connections between them.

A final potential benefit for archaeologists engaging with fictive techniques and, especially, the humanizing of narratives is that it may help us to avoid the dangers of hindsight or teleological thinking. Historians and archaeologists are blessed with the knowledge of how the past transpired and are therefore able to identify the significant developments that brought about these events. Yet, this insight sets historians apart from the people of the past and their own attempts to make sense of their present; in the words of Tolkien's Gandalf the Grey: 'even the very wise cannot see all ends' (1978: 73). Hindsight is therefore a mixed blessing, as we may fail to acknowledge the experience and agency of past actors and we risk writing teleological narratives that simply confirm the status quo. A nuanced understanding of the past, particularly historical causation, instead requires us to consider the possible alternatives that were not chosen as well as those that were (Ferguson 1998: 88; Grethlein 2010: 322–3; 2014). By vicariously experiencing history through fictional characters, confronting historical decisions and causation from their perspectives, fictive narrative can encourage deeper reflection on, and the revision of, established explanations.

Seeing through others' eyes

A key technique often used by novelists to connect the reader to the protagonist is empathy. In recent years, empathy has become a major focus of academic research and public policy. It has been characterized as the default tool with which we understand our fellow humans (Stueber 2006: 26) and is widely, though not universally, viewed as a positive force. In seeking to bring together fictive techniques and archaeological research, it is apparent that archaeological theorists have been generally dismissive or evasive on the subject of empathy (see van Helden and Witcher 2020c). This lack of consideration arguably reflects the broader research context, whereby philosophical and especially psychological studies of empathy have concentrated on emotional connectivity across cultures and space rather than through time; few studies examine empathy with people in the past (or future). Yet, a surprising number of

archaeologists hint at or confess their ambition to empathize with past people in order to gain insight into the latter's lives. Indeed, we suggest archaeologists make habitual use of empathetic thinking, consciously or otherwise, and that it is therefore important that this is made explicit in order that the effects can be recognized and appropriately critiqued (see van Helden and Witcher 2020c). Barry Cunliffe (2017: vi), for example, provides a visual example in his book on the archaeology of maritime Europe:

> I have chosen to orient our maps with west at the top, giving prime place to the setting of the sun. I find this offers a more stimulating way of trying to empathize with the people of the Mediterranean, while for people living along the Atlantic facade it conforms to the natural orientation of their world. I hope it may help the reader to see things differently – to be able to take a sea-wise view of the world.

In this example, Cunliffe uses cartographical cues to stimulate empathetic thinking; could fictive techniques be used similarly to arouse empathy with people of the past? And with what specific objectives?

The ultimate aim of empathy is to experience the world as another person would, to see through their eyes and to understand (if not to condone) their perspective and actions. The potential value of such insight for archaeologists is obvious; the ability to experience the past from an insider's perspective would offer enormous insight into the motivations and actions of people whose direct testimony is otherwise lost to us (van Helden and Witcher 2020c). The theoretical and practical considerations are, however, challenging. The historicist position, epitomized by Collingwood's (1937: 143–4) re-enactment doctrine, maintains that it is possible to step from one set of shoes into another. This idealizing scenario, however, has been criticized by, among others, the philosopher of hermeneutics, Hans-Georg Gadamer ([1960] 1990: 177–222). To stand outside of time is impossible, for it is our entanglement with history that enables us to think in the first place. Relinquishing our historical position in order to judge the past on its own terms would be to abandon the very condition of our understanding (Gadamer [1960] 1990: 280–95).

For Gadamer, we approach any task of interpretation with a number of prejudices (*Vorurteilen*). It is through these prejudices that our historicity enables and shapes our understanding. Rather than in the more familiar

pejorative sense, Gadamer uses prejudice to mean that which precedes judgement. This includes those concepts we need in order to pass judgement, thereby enabling our thinking. The constellation of prejudices with which we approach an object of interpretation is our horizon (Gadamer [1960] 1990: 270–81). We cannot see beyond the horizon; our view is situated. Initially, when we set out to interpret something (be it another person, a text or an archaeological object) we assume that it will conform to our prejudices, which guide our initial thinking. Only when expectations are not met, when a target object refuses to fit into our horizon and affronts our prejudices, do we pause to consider that object as something in need of interpretation. At that point, we attempt to change our preconceptions in order to accommodate integration within our horizon. This is also the point where we turn to empathy, attempting to understand the discrepancy by looking through the other's eyes. Gadamer, however, argues that it is not in the substitution of horizons but in the fusing of our own horizon and that of the target for interpretation that the moment of understanding lies, since we cannot wholly abandon our own point of view.

If our horizon is the precondition for our thinking, it is clear that we cannot hope for a direct or complete form of empathy, to fully experience reality as another does, for there is always an element of our own horizon in the fusion. Our perspective necessarily starts from a self-oriented perspective (how would *I* feel in such a situation) and, at best, ends up aspiring to an other-oriented perspective, grasped from within the limitations of our own vantage point (see Attridge 2004: 17–34 for a similar perspective). Gadamer's critique makes clear that we cannot achieve 'perfect' empathy, assuming completely the experiences of another person. Yet at the same time, we can recognize that such a total understanding is impossible of any aspect of reality. In this sense, our attempt to move from self-oriented to other-oriented empathy still constitutes a valid effort, for the imperfect information it may yield is no better or worse than could be expected via any other means. As the example of Cunliffe above suggests, our understanding of the past can be enriched by seeking to see the world through the eyes of past people, newly alert to our own situated knowledge and assumptions (that north is always to the top of a map) and glimpsing the alternatives (orienting instead towards the setting sun). Here is a literal fusion of horizons. Archaeologists have struggled to

resolve the universalist/constructivist dichotomy; determining the former to be culturally unacceptable and the relativism of the latter to be debilitating, most have chosen to avoid the subject. The insight offered by Gadamer is that, if the universalist position is impossible, the hermeneutic circle offers a way of reconciling our individual positionality with that of others. Because characterization and empathy are central to works of fiction, the techniques of novelists and writers of fiction therefore offer great potential for the exploration of these issues.

James Michener's *The Source*

The varied themes discussed above are well illustrated in a historical novel by the American author James Michener: *The Source* (1965). Michener (1907–1997) authored a series of best-selling novels set in an astonishing variety of periods and regions. Many of his works adopt narratives spanning multiple millennia and which therefore address themes of direct archaeological interest. *The Source* is particularly well known in archaeological circles as the story centres on the excavation of a fictional site in modern Israel called Tell Makor (from the Hebrew for 'mound' and 'source'). Michener narrates the long-term history of this settlement, from the Epipalaeolithic through to the 1960s, intertwining the wider history of the Jewish people with the investigation of the site by a team of archaeologists. In the process he addresses broader themes of religion (e.g. animism vs. monotheism), philosophy (e.g. concepts of self and home), politics (e.g. colonialism and nationhood) and identities (individual and corporate). Michener states at the start of the novel that 'Makor, its site, its history and its excavation are wholly imaginary' (1965: n.p.). Nonetheless, as with his other novels, Michener drew on extensive and detailed personal research into historical ideas and archaeological evidence, weaving these together to create a plausible ancient site and the story of its excavation. Tell Makor and its archaeological investigation thus blend the fictional and the factual.

The novel is structured around the discovery of specific archaeological objects which are linked to key episodes in the history of Makor. The chapters proceed in chronological order from the Epipalaeolithic through

to the mid-twentieth century; in parallel, Michener also narrates the story of the excavation of Makor's archaeological strata, which necessarily proceeds in reverse chronological order, from the most topmost, recent layers to the deepest and oldest. Thus, like most archaeological site reports, Michener must reconcile two temporal structures proceeding in opposite directions, narrating from prehistory to the present, while the archaeological evidence revealed through excavation proceeds from the most recent to the oldest (cf. Wallace 2004: 15). This structure requires various plot devices, such as finds made out of stratigraphic context, to bring together the relevant material and themes at the appropriate moment for the overall narrative. As each chapter moves to a new stratigraphic level, a new cast of characters and set of historical circumstances is introduced. Level/Chapter XV (the Epipalaeolithic) focuses on the protagonist Ur and the shift from hunting and gathering to agriculture. The subsequent chapters follow the descendants of Ur across the millennia. Although each new set of characters is largely ignorant of their lineage and the contingencies that have created their specific historical situations, the reader is aware of this genealogical thread, which acts as a counterpoint to the broader narrative themes of identity and destiny. From this vast, sprawling novel, we focus on two chapters: Level/Chapter XV *The Bee Eater* and Level/Chapter XII *Psalm of the Hoopoe Bird.*

The Bee Eater, set in 9831 BC, documents the origins of the settlement of Makor, the dynasty of Ur and the transition to farming. Ur's name symbolizes the importance that this man will play as the founder of the genealogical line that runs through the history of Makor. In German, the prefix 'Ur-' indicates a great time-depth, as well as connoting the root or source of something. The name also references Ur of the Chaldees, the birthplace of Abraham, the Patriarch of Judaism, Christianity and Islam, and the novel examines the intersection of these religions through the perspectives of the three directors of the excavation, one Jewish, one Christian and one Muslim. The relationship between these three characters provides a dialogic format for the expression of different perspectives on the organization of the dig and the interpretation of the finds, and for the wider political and religious themes the novel addresses. It is a format adopted in several archaeological works, both fictional and non-fictional (e.g. Flannery 1976; Ray and Thomas 2018). The chapter narrates the experiences and reflections of Ur and his family as they make the transition

from hunting and gathering to agriculture, precipitating a host of changes including new concepts of home, property, gods and gender relations. The catalyst for these developments is Ur's wife, who was captured in a raid by Ur's father on a group of agriculturalists. Determined to demonstrate the superiority of agriculture and to transform the lives of her family, she successfully brings round both their son and daughter, leading Ur reluctantly to acknowledge the advantages of farming. When, near the end of his life, his son-in-law, a great hunter, is killed while on a hunting trip, Ur's lingering hopes of his line returning to earlier ways are permanently put to rest and the trajectory of Makor (and humanity) is set.

Neolithization – the processes by which plants and animals were domesticated, communities settled and new forms of material culture such as pottery developed – has long been an important focus of archaeological research. During the mid-twentieth century, studies of the shift to agriculture were dominated by grand narratives such as V. G. Childe's (1936) 'Neolithic (or urban) revolution', which focused on broad-scale systems and processes rather than human agents. Michener's chapter complements and enhances this generalizing scale of analysis by incorporating individuals and social groups who demonstrate complex motives and emotions and who are caught in a variety of causal relationships. Noticeably, Michener resists the temptation to attribute technological developments to the 'genius' of individuals: the 'invention' of farming or the 'discovery' of metallurgy. Agriculture, for example, is portrayed as a process of conversion rather than invention, emerging from networks of people and ideas. While it is Ur's wife and son who make incremental improvements to the family's wheat-growing practice, it is Ur who articulates the momentousness of these changes (Michener [1965] 2014: 99–100):

> Ur cried suddenly, 'That's it!'
>
> 'What?' his wife asked, looking at him suspiciously.
>
> 'We've been trapped into putting all our energy into wheat.'
>
> 'What do you mean trapped?' she asked, caught by an ugly suspicion that Ur had discovered her own source of fear.
>
> 'When we have all the grain in one place, it can easily be destroyed.'

> (...) he had dared to express in words the growing fear that she and her son had experienced.

At moments such as this, Michener works to bridge multiple scales of analysis within a single narrative, combining long-term, large-scale processes with the experience and actions of the individuals that (he imagines) ultimately drove forward these changes. In this way, Michener's narrative demonstrates ways of thinking that were ahead of the archaeological accounts of the 1960s (when he was writing the novel) and that would only become central to archaeological interpretation several decades later. Although not all aspects of his treatment of this period withstand scrutiny today – not least due to the many subsequent discoveries and disciplinary developments – his fictional format offered a productive medium for exploring the extant evidence in relation to the mechanisms and consequences of the change in subsistence base.

Accounts of Michener's working practices give insight into how he researched and developed his narratives. A collaborator on one of his later novels describes how Michener conceptualized his approach to novels as a series of concentric circles, moving inwards from extensive library research through to the actual process of writing (cf. Trevelyan 1913; Kings 1978: 95) (Figure 7.1).

A key step in Michener's approach involved the use of trial and error to bring together into logical and meaningful scenes the disparate evidence that he had collated. This 'thinking through' of the evidence often involved Michener putting himself in the position of a protagonist to understand his or her bodily actions or motivations. In another novel, *Centennial* ([1974] 2007), for example, he narrates a scene around knapping flint tools in prehistoric North America. The account of the creation of this scene (recorded by his collaborator, Kings 1978: 52) demonstrates the extraordinary extent to which Michener not only consulted with specialists on the subject to acquire 'facts' but also sought to learn about the skills involved so that he could deduce his own hypotheses, which were then checked with experts and repeatedly refined (see also Hayes 1984: 184). This process parallels that of the archaeological researcher, working systematically to combine the evidence into plausible narratives. Arguably, however, the ambitious sweep of his novels additionally provided Michener with the broader framework that allowed him to draw out

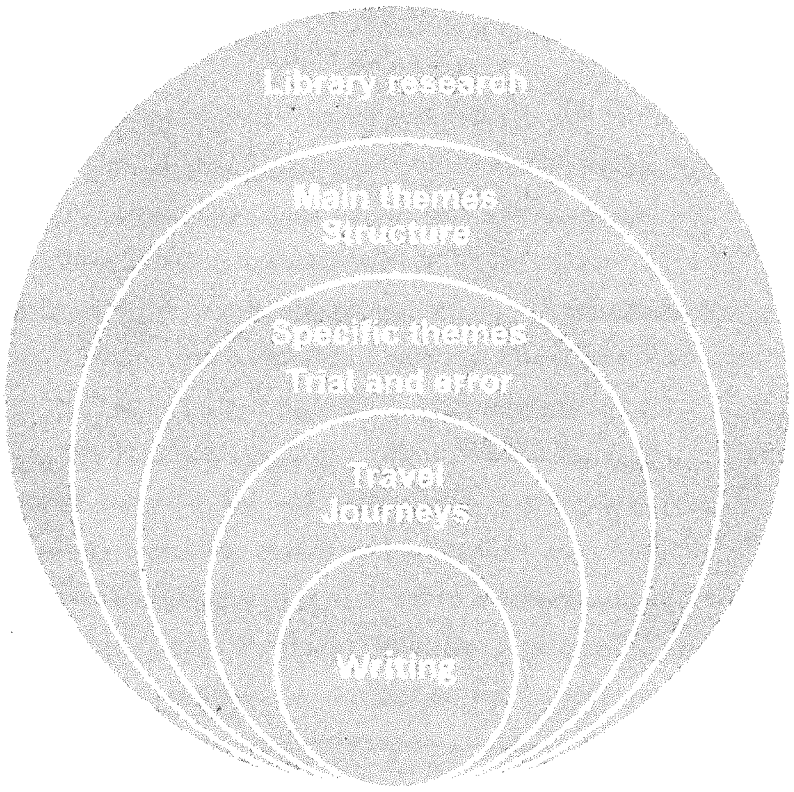

Figure 7.1 Michener's conceptualization of researching and writing a novel. Visualized by R. Witcher from verbal account in Kings (1978: 95).

the wider significance of these local-scale scenes. The ability of *The Source* to advance beyond the scholarly narratives of its day can be seen as a result of a combination of a traditional archaeological mindset – logical and empirical – with the use of imagination and creativity, giving Michener wider insight and the freedom to express this through invented characters.

If *The Bee Eater* illustrates how general archaeological themes can be explored through fictional techniques, Level/Chapter XII, *Psalm of the Hoopoe Bird*, offers an example of how Michener demonstrates the benefits of going beyond, while also remaining faithful to, specific archaeological evidence. The chapter is set in 963 BC and follows the engineer Hoopoe in the age of the biblical King David. Although he provides no references or footnotes in the novel to document his sources or research process, Michener was clearly familiar with the regional archaeological literature. This is well demonstrated by the story in Level/Chapter XII of the construction of a tunnel by Hoopoe, to provide direct access from Makor to its only source of fresh water, a well

located beyond the settlement's defensive wall. In the event of a siege, this tunnel would allow the inhabitants to hold out against the enemy. Michener narrates the conceptualization, construction and use of this tunnel in great detail. Much of what he describes in this chapter is based directly on an archaeological report (Lamon 1935) about a tunnel discovered at the site of Megiddo, located 35 km to the south of Makor's fictional location. Although a similar concept for securing the water supply of Jerusalem is mentioned in 2 Kings 20.20, the specifics of Michener's account can only come from Lamon's report. Yet whereas the latter limits itself to description of the tunnel's form and reconstruction of the building sequence, Michener elaborates on the motivations, decisions and methods of the builders, going well beyond the limits of standard archaeological narratives, while remaining entirely compatible with Lamon's account. The chapter, for example, explores not only the technical planning and construction of the tunnel but also how Hoopoe conceives of the project, builds community support for it and the social and political effects that its successful completion brings about. In doing so, Michener commits to paper a series of considerations that archaeologists may entertain about the material evidence but which are omitted from scholarly accounts because they extend beyond strict evidential limits. Yet if, as archaeologists, we are to understand why and how the tunnel was built, we also must advance beyond pure description and the logical ordering of construction phases. In creating a plausible scenario for the building of the tunnel – regional political instability, technical knowledge, group debate and consensus about the building project – Michener develops a narrative that is amenable to evaluation, alongside other accounts, of its relative strengths and weaknesses in explaining the archaeological evidence (Gibb 2020).

Michener's use of Lamon's account of the Megiddo tunnel is entirely compatible with the archaeological evidence with the exception of the addition to the story of an inscription; no such epigraphic evidence has been recovered from Megiddo. The details of this inscription, however, correspond closely to the Siloam inscription from Jerusalem, which documents the construction of a water tunnel and is reported as one of the earliest, long Hebrew texts – exactly how Michener describes it in *The Source* (Reich and Shukron 2011). In narrating the story of the tunnel in Level/Chapter XII, and of the site of Makor more generally, Michener therefore combines evidence from different

sites to create an archaeological 'composite' with which to advance his plot. This is an approach not dissimilar to that used by archaeologists who must often work with patchy or incomplete evidence. The standard plan of a Roman fort, for example, is pieced together using incomplete evidence from multiple sites, and Terrenato (2001) demonstrates how the conventional narrative of the evolution of Roman villas in Italy is an idealized sequence based on a composite of phases excavated at many different villas, but undocumented in its entirety at any individual site. Makor is therefore not *a* tell, but functions metonymically as *the* Tell, standing for all such sites. Makor plays the same role geographically as Ur's lineage plays genealogically. The site and Ur unify the narrative in such a way that local-scale histories are intertwined with global themes in a single coherent whole. The objectives and techniques of the archaeologist and the novelist can therefore be closely aligned, even if the resulting narratives are presented in different written forms and for audiences with differing expectations.

As with his chapter on the adoption of agriculture, Michener's account of Hoopoe's tunnel engages closely not only with archaeological evidence but also with archaeological ways of thinking by integrating different scales of analysis, the exploration of multiple perspectives and historical causation, and the primacy of human agency in large-scale processes. Above and beyond its treatment of the past, the novel is also highly sensitive to questions about the creation of knowledge through archaeological practice and alert to the dangers of the politicization of archaeological information in the service of nationalism or religious extremism. Throughout, the three directors of the excavation bring the insights and prejudices of their different backgrounds to bear on the creation of a historical narrative for the newly founded nation state of Israel. Michener exhibits an archaeological mindset, taking 'facts' and building narratives consistent with the evidence and giving the data historical meaning and trajectory by imputing human motivations; in doing so, he also uses the techniques of fiction both to think through and present the results. By putting himself empathetically into the shoes of the people he seeks to portray, Michener operates in a way that is more similar to the approach of archaeologists than the latter might admit. Michener's readers will not find his novels populated by particularly empathetic characters (Hayes 1984: 217); what he demonstrates, however, is the role of empathy in the *creation* rather

than the portrayal of those characters. As such, he offers an example of the importance of empathy to the writer (or archaeological researcher) rather than the reader. The presentation of the results in the format of a novel rather than a site report should not suggest that Michener's aims and methods are totally distinct from those of the academic archaeologist (Elphinstone and Wickham-Jones 2012). The value of studying a novel such as *The Source* lies not in identifying where it deviates from conventional archaeological thinking but in how it illuminates the strengths and weaknesses of archaeological narratives.

Conclusions

The title of this chapter draws inspiration from Sir Mortimer Wheeler's report on his excavations at Maiden Castle, an Iron Age hillfort in Dorset. So clear, he claims, was the archaeological evidence he uncovered that 'something less than imagination' was required to reconstruct the Roman storming of the hillfort (Wheeler 1943: 61). The evidence, he asserts, effectively spoke for itself. His reconstruction of the Roman attack is a rightly famous piece of archaeological narrative writing, but it clearly also blends the archaeological and the literary, interweaving archaeological finds with earlier textual narratives (Tacitus) and literary tropes (tragedy) (for further discussion, see van Helden and Witcher 2020b). Contrary to Wheeler's claim that the archaeological evidence spoke objectively, the material and literary are intimately interconnected in this text, each inspiring and imitating the other in equal measure. A long archaeological tradition has drawn on the techniques and the texts of the writers of fiction, no less than the craft of archaeology has offered rich metaphors and materials for creative writers. In this chapter, we have drawn attention not only to the risks – some more substantive than others – of archaeology engaging with fiction but also more importantly to the many benefits and opportunities that arise. We do not suggest that all attempts to think about the past using fictive techniques should end with the publication of fictional texts, nor – alert to the cream-bun syndrome – that the use of these techniques should become standard or even commonplace. Such techniques must be deployed judiciously and with clear purpose. Yet there is scope to use these approaches more ambitiously than they have been used to

date. Currently, fictional techniques tend to be called upon at the end of the archaeological research process to facilitate the dissemination of the results to wider audiences. But as the example of Michener's *The Source* suggests, fictive techniques can be employed profitably as part of the research process itself, as a valid means of integrating evidence, identifying gaps in understanding, analysing logical connections and causation, addressing social and political concerns, building emotional links with the past and more besides – in short, by making our ideas about the past 'actually work' (Elphinstone and Wickham-Jones 2012: 536). By recognizing the shared aims, methods and forms that connect archaeology and literature across the borderline of fact and fiction, we argue that we can write archaeological narratives that are simultaneously more creative and more rigorous. Through experimentation and emotional connections, we might also find more satisfying or even more fun ways to engage with the past. Without doubt, fictional narratives and the exploration of empathy will need to be embedded within a rational, hermeneutic framework of critical evaluation. But the same applies to any archaeological interpretation or narrative. Fictive techniques are compatible with a variety of theoretical approaches and should be used to complement, not replace, them (van Helden and Witcher 2020b).

In many ways, the structure of Michener's *The Source* mimics the hermeneutic position that we advocate. The novel tacks between scales large and small, between 'grand narrative' and the biographies of individual characters, and between the events of the past and of the present from where we must attempt to interpret them. More than just an effective example of the genre of historical fiction, Michener's book embodies a wider archaeological stance. Fittingly, it also provides an example of the provisional nature of our hermeneutic position as archaeologists. In his description of the schematic cross section that illustrates the excavation of the site, and which introduces the novel's final chapter, Michener writes: 'Observe also that the monolith to El, perhaps the most significant of the remains buried in the tell, will be missed by the excavators' ([1965] 2014: 965). Despite their exhaustive efforts, the archaeologists are denied – perhaps in perpetuity – the full story of Makor. That privilege is reserved for the novelist and the reader.

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